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Deaf Characters In Fiction And Drama

By ROBERT F. PANARA

It has often been debated that the deaf have been the victims of a great injustice by writers of fiction and drama. Some maintain that the deaf have been wholly neglected by well-known and established writers. Others claim that the image of the deaf has been grossly distorted, such that it bears no likeness to real-life characters.

Contrary to popular opinion, however, the evidence reveals that a surprising number of deaf characters has been featured in fiction and drama. Moreover, these characterizations have run the whole gamut of literary creations—ranging from stock characters and “freaks” to realistic portrayals of the deaf as we know them to be in real life.

Generally speaking, the wise and informed writer regards every character of his fiction as an individual rather than as a type. Accordingly, his depiction of the deaf shows that they are no different from the non-deaf, or from the normal run of fictional characters.

It should also be noted that one of the more interesting developments in modern fiction and drama has been the increasing appearance of deaf characters. The movement is significant, I believe, in that it gives rise to questions of cause and effect, of meaning and implication. Furthermore, it invites comparison with characterizations of the deaf by writers of earlier times. How do such characterizations reflect the attitudes of society toward the deaf in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries? Do they have their prototype, stereotype and symbol in the fiction and drama of those milieus? If so, were these characterizations intended to express similar themes and problems relating to the particular day and age?

As far as I have been able to discover, the first deaf character to arrive on the literary scene took place in an early novel by Daniel Defoe, entitled *The History of the Life and Surprising Adventures of Duncan Campbell*. This event occurred in the year 1715 and, appropriately enough, it paralleled the early beginnings of the novel as a form of literary fiction. Not only was Defoe a transitional figure in the development of the novel as we know it to be today, but he was also a pioneer in the attempt to lend realism or “verisimilitude” to the characters of the novel and to their life and times.

The Life and Surprising Adventures of Duncan Campbell is a picaresque novel, a type of fiction that was popular in 18th century England and in continental Europe. The term *picaresque* is derived from the Spanish word “*picaro*,” meaning a “rogue”—somewhat like our modern day “freewheeler” and “opportunist.” The novel is essentially the reverse of the traditional romance of chivalry—with the picaresque hero replacing the chivalrous hero; and realistic farce replacing romantic adventures. The plot is usually a series of miscellaneous incidents strung on a slender thread, and the story often ends with the rogue’s reform and marriage—as exemplified in Fielding’s *Tom Jones*.

In his “Introduction,” Defoe states that his story is primarily about the unique adventures of “an amazing deaf and dumb London gentleman, named Duncan Campbell.” Although he was born a deaf-mute, Duncan Campbell overcomes his handicap and proves to be an inspiration to others who are similarly afflicted, as well as to all those who come in direct contact with him. He learns to read and write, and to converse as well as anybody with normal speech and hearing. Likewise, he teaches others who are deaf and dumb to read and write, and converse with anybody.

Least the general reader begins to harbor some doubt about the authenticity of Duncan Campbell’s accomplishments, Defoe devotes a whole chapter to the education of the deaf in general, and to Duncan Campbell’s schooling in particular. He

describes, methodically and with exact details, how the finger alphabet is used to teach the deaf their ABC’s; how they learn the phonetic equivalents of these letters; how flash cards and the writing of words on the slate build up their vocabulary; and how they learn to read and write by dint of endless repetition and patient application.

Undoubtedly, Defoe did much research into the various methods of teaching language and speech that were being developed at the time, beginning with Bonet of Spain in 1620 and continuing with the work of Bulwer, Dalgarno and Wallis in early 18th century England. It also reflects the attitude of optimism and liberalism, together with the spirit of scientific inquiry, which characterized the 18th century “Age of Reason.” In such a period of enlightenment and hope for the general benefit of mankind, it was but a natural consequence that great impetus was given to the education of the deaf and to their acceptance by society as rational human beings. Thus, it is to Defoe’s credit that he enhanced the image of the deaf by writing about Duncan Campbell—an outstanding example of what society can do toward the education and rehabilitation of the “deaf and dumb.”

At the same time, Defoe was working toward the development of “verisimilitude” or realism in the novel. By giving such a detailed account of how Duncan Campbell was educated and restored to society, he apparently succeeded in the attempt to convince his readers of the rest of Campbell’s exploits and adventures.

To the informed and sophisticated reader of today, these exploits are too sensational and exaggerated even to seem probable. For example, Duncan Campbell becomes so adept at speech and lipreading that he completely disguises his deafness whenever he so desires. The fact that he will sometimes revert to the role of a helpless and ignorant deaf mute is organic to his role in the novel—that of a rogue and a charlatan. Posing at times as a mendicant outcast, and at other times as a charming “gigolo,” he always manages to keep his chips about him, worm his way into high society and make a handsome profit for himself. Defoe also invests him with a photographic memory and the gift of prophecy. With such powers, he can set down in writing the name of any stranger at first sight, tell him his past actions and predict his future fortune. In this wise, the “deaf and dumb” charlatan practices his profession with great success over the years—from the peeress to the waiting woman, and from the lady mayoress to the milliner and seamstress. And, in the end (as with all heroes of the picaresque novel), he undergoes a reformation of the spirit, marries and settles down to a life of respectability.

While on the subject of “charlatans,” or “fakes,” it is interesting to note that several novelists after Defoe found it advantageous to use “deaf imposters” in their tales of adventure and intrigue.

The picaresque novel was still the literary vogue when Tobias Smollett composed *Peregrine Pickle* in 1751. This novel features a veritable “rogues gallery” of characters, among them being Cadwallader Crabtree, a waspish and misanthropic old Welshman who assists the hero in his exposes of society’s fakes and hypocrites. Crabtree habitually feigns deafness so as to become master of the thousand gossips and secrets whispered daily without any suspicion of their being overheard. Deafness is thus humorously dealt with—and with profitable benefits to both the imposter and his freewheeling colleague.

In the early stages of the 19th century, Sir Walter Scott was master of the historical romance. In *The Talisman* (1825), he unfolds the whole stirring tale of the great Crusade led by King Richard the Lionhearted, of the siege of Jerusalem, and his encounter with Saladin—the noble Moslem leader. In this story, Sir Kenneth of Scotland, who is really the Prince Royal, disguises himself as a Nubian deaf-mute slave in the service of King Richard. The king thus uses the deaf imposter as a spy to test the loyalty of his allies, whom he suspects are plotting a counterattack against Saladin, his true friend and ally.

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After many exciting adventures and intrigues, Jerusalem is declared an "open city," the Crusade is ended, and Richard reveals the true identity of the "deaf-mute slave." As his reward, Sir Kenneth is finally allowed to marry his true love, Lady Edith Plantagenet, the king's own cousin.

A spy, impersonating the character of a deaf mute, is also used by Scott in a subsequent novel, *Peverill of the Peak* (1831). The story deals with the Puritan Rebellion led by Cromwell and the bitter conflict between the Cavaliers and the "Round-heads" or Puritan commoners. In the "cloak and dagger" mystery episodes, an Asiatic gypsy girl impersonates the deaf-mute character, Fenella, who functions as a spy for the Round-head sympathizer, Edward Christian. Actually, she is Christian's daughter by an Eastern wife, but she is made to believe that she is the daughter of his martyred brother, William Christian. Fenella is an expert at feigning "deafness and dumbness"; she also reveals great empathy in perceiving the needless agony experienced by the hero, Peverill—a loyal Catholic and Cavalier—and his faithful sweetheart, Alice Bridgenorth, whose family are loyal to the Puritan cause. This Romeo-Juliet type of plot furnishes the main interest of the novel, and Fenella's innate sense of decency and integrity leads her to betray her secret at the end—thus saving the life of Peverill and uniting the two suffering lovers. It also reflects the incomparable humanity and honesty of Sir Walter Scott who always brought out the nobility of thought and action in his leading characters. In his introduction to the novel, Scott notes that the character of Fenella "made a favourable impression on the public, yet was far from being original." Actually, "the fine sketch of Mignon, in Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Lehrjahre*, provided the idea for such a character."

As can be seen by the foregoing, although these impersonations of deaf mute characters are used solely as melodramatic devices for added humor, mystery or intrigue, it is heartening to find that these characterizations do not debase or ridicule the infirmity of deafness. This is the measure of good judgment and taste by great writers, and it further explains why such novels have become literary classics.

This truism is evident even when the deaf are characterized as "freaks" or "grotesques," or when their actions are depicted as highly improbable—which is to say, distortions of reality. One such example is *The Prince of India* by Lew Wallace, the celebrated author of *Ben Hur*. Published in 1893, after the success of *Ben Hur*, *The Prince of India* is a historical romance in two volumes about the conflict between the Greeks and the Turks in the 15th century, when Constantinople fell to the Turks. The story itself, however, concerns the Prince of India, cast in the role of the legendary "Wandering Jew."

The epitome of occultism, the Prince of India cloaks his entire life in mystery. This is greatly enhanced by the way he surrounds himself with six bodyguards—all of whom are deaf. Only two of them, however, have important roles in the plot—Syama, the Prince's trusted slave, and Nilo, a gigantic African king who left his native tribe to follow the footsteps of the "Wandering Jew." There is no real clue as to why the Prince likes to acquire deaf-mutes as his disciples and bodyguards, the implication being that 1) he has a penchant for the exotic and strange; 2) he has great compassion for the oppressed and the deprived minority; 3) he can perform miracles and wonders in atonement for his long suffering sin of having participated in the crucifixion of Christ centuries before.

In the course of their adventures, Nilo saves Lael, a Jewess adopted by the Prince, from a Greek attacker; he also saves the life of Sergius, a Russian monk in love with Lael, from certain death in the arena when he bravely faces a lion, armed only with a short sword and net. This superhuman feat so impresses the Emperor of Constantinople that he frees Sergius.

Sergius is suspicious of the Prince for adopting the Jewess he loves. Lael gladly offers an explanation, yet confesses her own wonder of the Prince's mysterious ways:

"... and what is the strangest to me, Sergius—his domestics are all deaf and dumb."

"Impossible!"

"Nothing appears impossible to him."

"How does he communicate to them?"

"They catch the meaning of the motions of his lips. He says that signs are too slow and uncertain for close explanations."

"Still, he must resort to some language."

"Oh, yes, the Greek."

"But if they have something (important) to impart to him?"

"It is theirs to obey, and pantomime seems sufficient to convey the little they have to return to him... If the matter be complex, he resorts to the lip-speech, which he could not teach without first being proficient in himself."

Despite such distortions of reality—all of which are undoubtedly necessary in maintaining the aura of mystery that pervades the novel—it is noteworthy that Wallace depicts these deaf-mutes as courageous, noble and trustworthy in character.

The 19th century idealized the innate goodness of man, his capacity for love and compassion, his obligation to help others less fortunate than himself. As William Wordsworth, the poet and spokesman of the Romantic Era, so aptly expressed it:

"Thanks to the human heart by which we live,

Thanks to its tenderness, its joys, and fears;

To me, the meanest flower that grows can give

Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears."

These are the great themes of its classics in poetry and prose, and they are eloquently manifest in the education of the deaf in Europe and America. For it was in the 19th century that society evinced a genuine and a humanitarian interest in the deaf, such that great progress was made in regard to their education and welfare.

This spirit and sentiment is reflected in the work of some of the greatest writers of the time: Wilkie Collins and Charles Dickens.

In an early work, *Hide and Seek*, Collins was in the process of developing the mystery novel—later to be perfected in such classics as *The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone*. Published in 1861, *Hide and Seek* unravels the mystery of an illegitimate girl's parentage. As the result of an accident as a child performer in a circus, the heroine becomes deaf and mute. She is adopted by a compassionate artist whose wife is bedridden by an incurable malady.

In the first half of the novel, Collins invades the realm of domestic fiction, reserving the detection of the heroine's true identity for the second half. The first half is of particular interest in that it focuses on the education and rehabilitation of the deaf-mute heroine. With convincing realism, Collins describes the sound medical advice and counseling given after the girl's onset of deafness. Her benefactors are told that she will prosper in an environment free from tension and complete with love and security; that her acquisition of language, rather than speech, is of paramount importance toward her educational progress and social adjustment; and that these goals can be best achieved through habitual and persistent involvement in communication, in domestic affairs, and in relating these learning experiences with real-life activities and interests.

Thus, the deaf-mute's bedridden foster mother becomes her teacher and confidant. She learns her ABC's via "the natural method" of learning the alphabet and building up words, phrases, sentences by imitation, repetition and association. Her constant companion is a little chalkboard or slate which is attached to her waistband, and she thus is able to communicate as swiftly and fluently as one might do with pad and pencil. The great benefit of this graphic method of communication is that she can visualize the spelling of words and the syntax of language. In addition, her own mistakes can be instantly spotted, erased and substituted with the correct form.

In one of the many footnotes that enhance the novel, Collins maintains that "this work pioneers the attempt to draw the character of a deaf-mute simply and exactly after nature." He further states that it is an attempt "to show the moral purpose" of exhibiting "the better parts of human nature" and so reveal "with what patience and cheerfulness the heavier bodily afflictions of humanity are borne, for the most part, by those afflicted; and also to note what elements of kindness and gentleness the spectacle of these afflictions constantly develops in the persons of the little circle by which the sufferer is surrounded."

The deaf-mute heroine is thus depicted as a lovely and intelligent woman, possessing a lively personality and imagination, and keenly sensitive to beauty and art. In a subsequent footnote, Collins makes the admission that he drew ideas and inspiration for his character from a deaf-mute contemporary—Dr. John Kitto, renowned as a Biblical scholar, poet and essayist.

Charles Dickens was a close friend of Wilkie Collins. This may explain the appearance of a deaf-mute in one of his *Christmas Stories*, entitled "Dr. Marigold" (1900). One of Dickens' most lovable characters, Dr. Marigold is a bluff and boisterous circus "barker" with a heart of gold (the type later made famous on film by W. C. Fields). It is the story of how he endures the sham trade of "Cheap Jacks," the joys and sorrows of carnival life, the tragic death of Sophy, his retarded daughter who was victimized by his unsettled wife, her own sudden ending and his subsequent adoption of a deaf and dumb waif—whom he names "Sophy."

What makes the story particularly appealing is the account of his devoted attention to the education and happiness of his adopted deaf-mute daughter. Taking his cue from Collins' heroine, Dickens also describes Sophy's acquisition of language via "the natural method." Dr. Marigold even builds a "Library Cart" for Sophy. Partitioning off half of their traveling covered wagon which serves as a home, he installs a desk and chair, a corner bookcase, and fills up the shelves with hundreds of books attractively bound in various colors. Thus, Sophy is encouraged to develop the reading habit and eventually she acquires a large vocabulary. Her knowledge of syntax and idiom, however, is not fully developed. Dr. Marigold realizes this deficiency; he also knows that he doesn't have the time needed to tutor her as he would like. Accordingly, he saves his money, and eventually sends Sophy to a private school for the deaf for two years. Upon her return at eighteen years of age, she is a lovely and intelligent woman—and she can now carry on a fluent conversation by method of lipreading. She does not express herself by speech, however, and this prompts Marigold to work at developing the art of lipreading until he is almost as proficient as his daughter.

It is interesting to note that both Collins and Dickens were most honest and realistic in reflecting the attitudes of society toward the deaf and the prevailing method of educating the deaf. This stressed the importance of learning to read and write as a means of developing language skills. Significantly, society itself did not expect the deaf "to speak their own language." Oriented as they were to the written and the printed word, people in the 19th century could easily accommodate the deaf and communicate with them by method of pad and pencil. It is only in the 20th century, when so much stress is put on oral communication, that the average person (who should be even more literate than his 19th century forebear) finds it both inconvenient and embarrassing to communicate fluently with the deaf by pad and pencil. All of which serves to underscore the increasing torment and isolation of the deaf in a world dominated by the telephone, the radio, talking pictures and television.

Indeed, this could very well be the theme of a tragic drama written by Eugene O'Neill in 1913, entitled "Warnings." The tragic figure in this play is James Knapp, the wireless operator of the *S.S. Empress*, who is being victimized by a severe hearing loss.

Early in the play, we learn that the Knapp family is barely making ends meet and that they are counting heavily on the next pay check which the father will bring home after his next voyage. We also learn that he has spent quite a few dollars on visits to the doctor in an attempt to diagnose his hearing impairment. In a moving scene, just before he leaves home, he tells his wife that he should quit his job rather than risk the possibility of jeopardizing the lives of all the people who will cruise on the *Empress*. His wife, however, reminds him of their poverty; she also reminds him of how she has slaved to patch worn out clothes and to try and keep up a respectable home. In desperation, Knapp leaves home for his tour of duty, saying:

"For God's sake let me alone! I'll go! I'll go! But this is going to be my last trip. I got to do the right thing!"

The next scene of action finds Knapp in the wireless room of the ocean liner. The ship has just hit a sunken derelict and it is listing heavily. The Captain enters for the third time and asks if any response has come from their SOS message. Nervous and bewildered, Knapp repeatedly answers: "I haven't heard a thing, sir." Finally, the Captain becomes infuriated. After firing a volley of questions at Knapp and receiving no answer, he grabs the man roughly by the shoulder: "Did you hear what I said? Dammit, answer my question!" His lips trembling, Knapp replies: "No, sir." "What?" roars the Captain—and then he shouts into the earphones which Knapp has over both his ears: "Say something, can't you? Are you deaf? When Knapp recoils in fear and still makes no answer, the Captain grabs hold of the earphones and jerks them off the operator's ears. "Now! Answer me! What in hell's the matter with you?" At that moment, Knapp breaks down. He puts his face in his arms and weeps hysterically:

"Oh my God! It's come! I can't hear a word you say. I can't hear anything! Oh, I should have told you, sir, before we started—but we're so poor . . . I was going to make this one more trip . . . Oh, God, who would have dreamt this could have happened at such a time! I'm not a bad man, Captain. And now I'm deaf—stone deaf!"

Cursing his luck, the Captain gets another man with some experience to operate the wireless. In time, they learn that the *Verdari*—the ship which they had been trying to contact—is over 100 miles away and that it had been trying to communicate with the *Empress* for a long time, but without success. Worse still, the *Verdari* had repeatedly sent messages, warning the *Empress* about the location of the sunken derelict which had been sighted several days before.

In a rage, the Captain goes to strike Knapp, but he suddenly restrains himself. Instead, he tells the substitute radio-man to hand Knapp the message of "Warning" which they just received from the *Verdari*. Then he orders the lifeboats launched and prepares to evacuate the sinking ship.

The final scene finds Knapp all alone in the radio room, reading the fateful "warning" from the *Verdari*. His face becomes white with horror:

"God! It's my fault then! It's my fault!" Suddenly, he reacts and staggers weakly to his feet: "What if the ship is lost?" He looks through the porthole and sees where they are lowering the boats. With a despairing cry, he staggers toward the desk and pulls out a revolver from the drawer: "She is lost! She is lost!" He presses the gun against his temple; there is a sharp report—and Knapp falls forward on his face, on the floor before his radio instrument.

In many ways, O'Neill's depiction of the loneliness, the isolation and the frustration experienced by the deaf in a world committed to oral communication foreshadowed the increasing appearances of deaf characters in the fiction and drama of the 20th century. This is particularly evident in the work of its most serious writers. Furthermore, it is most significant that the great majority of these writers have depicted the deaf as symbols, not types. In other words, they have acutely sensed the deepening well of loneliness that exists in the soul of modern man, and his gradual withdrawal and alienation from society. By relating the eternal need of the deaf to express themselves and feel wanted by their fellowmen, the modern writer will often use deaf characters to symbolize the large and universal problems of everyman.

As one writer has commented on this tendency in modern literature:

"There is a marked concern for abnormal or heightened psychological states. Characters frequently deviate widely in the direction of grotesque, twisted or alienated personalities. Often the physical appearance will symbolize the inner state . . . Similarly there is a disposition toward fear, horror, terror, insecurity and the failure of love."¹

A vivid illustration of this approach is Carson McCullers' great novel, *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* (1940). The title itself is most significant. It is the theme of isolation, of lone-

¹Wiggins, Robert A. Ambrose Bierce, Pamphlets on American Writers, No. 37, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1964, p. 46.

liness and longing, which reflect the breakdown of communication in modern society. John Singer, the deaf-mute character and protagonist of the novel, symbolizes the plight of all men. His experience is reflected in the lives of four other major characters who are drawn toward the deaf-mute at various times—Biff Brannon, Mick Kelly, Jake Blount and Dr. Copeland.

Each of these characters, in turn, symbolizes the problems of the type he represents. Biff Brannon, the tavernkeeper, is unhappily married and he seems to find some consolation for this loss in sympathizing with cripples and "sick people." Mick Kelly is the perennial teenage adolescent whose ambitions to become an opera star and live in the world of music receive neither sympathy nor understanding from her dull and unimaginative parents. Jake Blount, a frustrated Socialist, finds escape and solace in the small town and in alcohol. Dr. Copeland, the Negro idealist and advocate of protest by non-violence, can neither inspire his own race to better their standards of living nor interest the whites in relieving themselves of their "burden."

Even John Singer has his problems. His best friend, a corpulent and ignorant deaf-mute, has been sent away to the state insane asylum. This leaves Singer both desolate and more inarticulate than ever, since he cannot even communicate by means of the language of signs. However, he can still look forward to an occasional visit to his friend in the asylum, even though the distance is great and involves a long and lonely train ride.

One by one, each of these characters is attracted to the deaf-mute. Because he is deaf and mute, they find a corresponding sense of isolation and separation from society. They also experience a great relief in purging themselves of their individual tensions and longings during those intervals when they visit Singer in his boarding house room. Although the deaf-mute cannot understand a word, he has great sensitivity and empathy, and he "listens" most solicitously and with smiling commiseration. His own "catharsis," or release from tension, occurs whenever he gets to visit his deaf friend in the asylum. Only then does Singer take his hands from out of his pockets and express himself as eloquently and as passionately as a songbird.

The day comes, however, when Singer learns that his friend had died. His desolation and isolation is now complete, and he prepares for the final withdrawal. Returning to his room, he takes up a gun and kills himself.

Upon learning of Singer's death, each of the four characters senses a corresponding loss. Each one symbolizes the loneliness of the human heart and its perpetual yearning for love, and understanding, and self-expression.

An even more vivid example of how deaf characters are made to symbolize the dilemma of modern man is evidenced in *The Chairs*, a tragic farce by Eugene Ionescu (1951). Representing the new movement toward the "Theatre of the Absurd," *The Chairs* fully exploits each and all of its many incongruities—the use of "grotesques," startling and unusual stage effects, and surrealistic scenes—all for the purpose of accentuating the utter futility of man's attempt to communicate meaningfully, and the uselessness of his existence.

Briefly, the situation of the play involves an Old Man and an Old Woman who live in an island home. Theirs has been a lonely and a mediocre life, and the time has come when the Old Man prepares to die. However, he has something of great importance to say before passing on, and he will do so in "a blaze of glory" to make up for all his years of mediocrity. Accordingly, he invites the whole township of men and women to hear the great message.

One by one the guests arrive—each one invisible to the audience. However, as the Old Man introduces them by name, he brings out a chair for each guest—until the whole stage is cluttered with chairs. In a gay mood, the old couple warms up to the occasion by chatting with their guests—inquiring about their health, family, business—and then the Old Man announces that an important message will be heard. At that particular moment, the Old Couple leap out the open window into the sea of oblivion. This leaves only the Orator on stage—the last guest to arrive. What follows gives dramatic impact to the theme of the play.

The Orator faces the rows of empty chairs and gestures to the invisible guests that he is deaf and dumb. He tries to convey his meaning in sign language, but his cause is hopeless. In desperation, he tried to resort to speech, but this only results in the harsh and guttural sounds of a deaf-mute:

"He, mme, mm, mm, Ju, gou, hou, hou. Heu, heu, gu, gou, gueue . . ." Failing again, he has an idea. Taking a piece of chalk out of his pocket, he writes on the blackboard:

ANGEL FOOD

After several repeated attempts at using signs and speech prove useless, the Orator writes on the blackboard:

Λ A D I E U Λ D I E U Λ P A

Then, bowing ceremoniously to the invisible crowd, the deaf-mute exits. Only the empty chairs are visible on stage as the curtain falls.

It has often been said, and most truthfully, that "Speech is Silver but Silence is Gold." This truism is reflected in the work of quite a few modern day writers of fiction, and it is but natural that some should use the image of deafness to symbolize their theme. Probably the best example of this statement, which is expressed in the most oblique manner of modern fiction, occurs in that best selling novel by J. D. Salinger, *The Catcher In The Rye* (1951).

In his psychological study of Holden Caulfield, an idealistic teenage rebel, Salinger presents us with a sort of modern-day version of *Huckleberry Finn*. Near the end of the novel, young Holden Caulfield gets fed up with the life he is leading and goes for a long walk up Fifth Avenue, New York City. He is absorbed in thought, which comes to us via the "stream of consciousness" that makes this novel so realistic to our own experience.

Holden Caulfield finally decides to "run away from it all"—leave home and start hitchhiking his way out West until he gets to a nice place "where it was very pretty and sunny and where nobody'd know me and I'd get a job. It doesn't matter what kind of job, "just so people didn't know me and I didn't know anybody."

To insure complete oblivion and peace of mind, Caulfield says:

"I'd pretend I was one of those deaf-mutes. That way, I wouldn't have to have any goddam stupid useless conversations with anybody. If anybody wanted to tell me something, they'd have to write it on a piece of paper and shove it over to me. They'd get bored as hell doing that after a while, and then I'd be through having conversations for the rest of my life. Everybody'd think I was just a poor deaf-mute bastard and they'd leave me alone."

Caulfield further reasons that he would save his money while working at a filling station until he was able to build a little cabin somewhere, and live happily ever after. He'd build it "right near the woods, but not in them, because I'd want it to be sunny as hell all the time." Thus would he find his "place in the sun" and become completely independent. And, later on, he says:

"... if I wanted to get married or something, I'd meet this beautiful girl that was also a deaf-mute and we'd get married. She'd come and live in my cabin with me, and if she wanted to say anything to me, she'd have to write it on a goddam piece of paper, like everybody else. If we had any children, we'd hide them somewhere. We could buy them a lot of books and teach them how to read and write by ourselves."

The farther he walks up Fifth Avenue and views "the madding crowd" and the crass materialism that surrounds him, the greater grows his revulsion of all that is sordid and false in our day and age. By yearning to "go West," he wants to make a clean, fresh start in life. And the values of solitude, innocence, truth and beauty are symbolized by his dream cabin at the edge of the woods and by pretending to be a deaf-mute. Even the pad and pencil become symbolic of the most artless and unaffected method of communication with society. There is a classic simplicity in expressing oneself with pad and pencil, and happiness is a deaf-mute in the blissful solitude of a Western "Walden."

Undoubtedly, Salinger saw some connection between "the population explosion" and the breakdown of communication in modern society. The point might well be argued by social historians of the future, and they might justifiably include the insidious effects of "noise pollution" upon our social sanity. Whatever the case, Salinger imbues the theme of deafness with deeper meaning in a subsequent story, *Raise High the Roof-beam, Carpenters* (1963).

In this work, the narrator, named Buddy, has just come off a hospital bed while serving in the Army. He receives a letter from his sister which brings the sudden news that their eldest brother, Seymour, is going to be married. The news is most unsettling. Not only does it come at a time when Buddy is quite unfit to celebrate the occasion, but he also learns that his sister can't be present at the wedding and that he is expected to take her place. Worse still, she does not approve of the bride-to-be nor of the bride's family.

Shortly afterwards, we find Buddy stuck in a taxicab with the bride's relation on their way to the wedding. To compound matters, the day is unbearably hot and they are held up by a big parade on Madison Avenue, New York City. During the long "moment of truth" while waiting for the parade to pass, Buddy confirms his sister's dislike for the bride's family. This is heightened when they lose their way to the wedding and Seymour becomes the target of much verbal abuse. Before the quarrel erupts into a family feud, Buddy offers to make a phone call for help and to cool off with a nice cold drink somewhere.

At this moment, he discovers an unexpected friend and ally in the person of the bride's father's uncle—an unobtrusive little old man who is deaf and mute. The latter is smoking a big cigar and seems to be at peace with the world.

Eagerly, Buddy writes on a sheet of paper: "We're being help up indefinitely by the parade. We're going to find a phone and have a cold drink somewhere. Will you join us?" The message is handed to the tiny gentleman:

"He read it, grinning, and then looked at me and wagged his head up and down several times vehemently. I thought for an instant that this was the full and perfectly eloquent extent to his reply, but he suddenly motioned to me with his head, and I gathered that he wanted me to pass my pad and pencil. I did so . . . The old man adjusted the pad and pencil in his lap with the greatest care, then sat for a moment, pencil poised, in obvious concentration, his grin diminished only a very trifle. Then the pencil began, very steadily, to move. An "i" was dotted. And then both pad and pencil were returned to me, with a marvelously cordial extra wag of the head. He had written, in letters that had not quite jelled yet, the single word, "Delighted." The Matron of Honor, reading over my shoulder, gave a sound faintly like a snort, but I quickly looked over at the great writer and tried to show by my expression that all of us in the car knew a poem when we saw one, and were grateful."

Unable to find an open restaurant because of the big parade, they all go to Buddy's apartment which happens to be located nearby. Once inside, Buddy busies himself with serving drinks to the guests. However, this only loosens their tongues and raises the volume of biting gossip about his brother, Seymour.

Buddy's only comfort is the sight of the tiny old deaf-mute: "He was ensconced in my dead Boston bull's old chair. His tiny legs were crossed, his hair was combed, his gray stain was as arresting as ever, and—lo and behold—his cigar was lighted. We greeted each other even more extravagantly than usual, as though these intermittent separations were suddenly too long and unnecessary for either of us to bear with."

Eventually, they learn via phone call that the bridegroom, Seymour, had suddenly decided to call off the wedding ceremony and that he has eloped with the bride. The wedding reception, however, is proceeding as scheduled at the downtown hotel. The group promptly decides to take in the wedding reception. That is, all except Buddy and his silent partner.

They celebrate their new found peace and quiet by fixing themselves another drink. As Buddy gradually unwinds, he takes the deaf-mute into his confidence and defends Seymour's seeming aberrations of behavior—past and present. As he recounts the episodes of Seymour's past, he notes that his deaf companion never once disputes him.

"The contrary. He grinned at me encouragingly, as though anything further I had to say on the subject could go down as the absolute truth with him."

Feeling doubly blessed by his escape from the bride's relations and by the happy circumstance that brought about his acquaintance with the bride's father's uncle, Buddy falls asleep on the couch. When he finally awakens, it is late in the afternoon. He looks around and discovers that he is left alone:

"My last guest had evidently let himself out of the apartment. Only his empty glass, and his cigar end in the pewter ashtray, indicated that he had ever existed. I still rather think his cigar end should have been forwarded on to Seymour, the usual run of wedding gifts being what it is. Just the cigar, in a small, nice box. Possibly with a blank sheet of paper enclosed, by way of explanation."

It is obvious that Salinger has once again used a deaf-mute character to illustrate the ideal of silence and the blissful ignorance of those who are immune to the "sound and fury" of our modern temper. The irony of the matter, however, is not in the fact that the image of the deaf comes out so favorably. Rather, it only underscores the truths that all this is merely wishful thinking, that Life itself is still a fiction involving appearance and reality, and that, in actuality, there is a striking similarity in the problems of the deaf and the dilemma of modern man.

These truths are brought into a clearer focus in a recent work of fiction by Joanne Greenberg entitled, *In This Sign* (1970). It is one of the few novels in which deaf characters play the major roles. Indeed, it goes even further inasmuch as it tries to reproduce the language and idiom of the illiterate deaf by method of the stream of consciousness techniques which plumbs the depths of their inner thoughts and feelings and which vividly accentuates their problems of communication.

The setting of the novel is in an unnamed city, somewhere in northern New York State. The main characters, Abel and Janice Ryder, are secretly married while attending a state school for the deaf. When the news becomes public, they are asked to leave, and the story of their life begins when they enter the great, Unknown World of the Hearing.

They take an immediate plunge into the slough of poverty and despondency because of a rash act of ignorance by Abel. Unable to resist the lure of a shiny new 1919 Pierce Arrow, he buys the car with a small down payment, not realizing the huge debt he has incurred by assuming the balance. After a frightening experience, of driving the car and wrecking it, he sells it to the first "slicker" he encounters "for more money than he paid for it." Soon, Abel is brought to court, when he and Janice first face up to the realities of life—and the consequence of their illiteracy.

Through an interpreter, they learn that their debt to the car dealer adds up to \$6,000. In order to pay this debt, and the interest involved, Abel's monthly wages as an apprentice printer will be garnished by his employer for a period of 20 years. This harsh experience in an unfeeling courtroom is grief enough, but Abel comes in for a greater shock when the interpreter suddenly berates his ignorance:

Comstock's hands flew with his words: "You damned fool . . . You'll be out begging in the street before winter is over, with a sign on your shirt!" His Sign was almost too quick to understand. "Hearing will pity you because they're stupid and they pity all Deaf, so you'll beg and all the Deaf will be pitied. Why did you come here and make trouble? People who work hard and never owed a cent will be called Deafie and be laughed at and taken advantage of because of you!"

The life style of Abel and Janice Ryder for most of the next 20 years is one of abject squalor and misery as they exist merely to pay off the debt. Yet, and in a manner reminiscent

of the characters in DeMaupassant's "The Necklace," they doggedly face up to this task. Indeed, the chronicle of how they persevere not only reflects the American spirit but it also underscores those unsung virtues of our minority groups and "second citizens" who have been unjustly victimized for being ignorant, or different, or unable to express themselves "like others."

These are some of the underlying themes of Greenberg's novel, and they often surface by method of flashbacks into the past. Although she is consistently objective and unsentimental, Greenberg nevertheless makes a strong point against a rigid and inflexible school system that will not provide for the individual needs of the slow learning or exceptional child. In Abel's case, it involved his inability to progress in the school for the deaf because he could not learn to lipread and speak. His individual plight is revealed via the flow of consciousness which recalls a typical school day:

Everyone was sitting at the row of desks that filled the room, and at the front, facing the wrong way, was the desk at which the woman sat, against the children. Her mouth was speaking and there was something "Aaa." He quickly took off his hat because he thought he understood "hat," but the whole room rose, big and small. Backs were to him, blocking him from the woman's mouth. Suddenly, they all sat down again . . . Time-time. Years . . . His row he learned, was: Woman's teeth on lip, roll, teeth-smile-top-and-bottom. When he saw that lip-thing beginning, he swept the room, hoping to see, to anticipate, to know, to do, quickly, before he should be punished or laughed at.

This human longing to communicate and to feel wanted had attracted him to Janice, who is proficient in the language of signs. It also explains why they are unnaturally possessive in rearing their normal hearing daughter, Margaret, who literally endures the sufferings of a "Griselda" in serving as their only link with the world of Hearing. As the sole interpreter for her illiterate parents, moreover, Margaret actually experiences a severe language retardation, and her story of loneliness and desire for natural self-expression parallels that of her deaf parents.

The story of how Margaret perseveres is also a reflection of her parents' virtues. Shortly after Pearl Harbor and the declaration of war, she falls in love with an intelligent and sensible soldier, and they marry. Naturally, this shakes the very foundations of the small, silent world of her parents. For the first time now, Abel and Janice find it necessary to live without Margaret; they must also learn to widen their social interaction so as to include Margaret's husband and her in-laws.

Abel and Janice never quite manage to make a complete social adjustment, so ingrained are the habits of years and so great the communication barrier between the Deaf-Hearing. Nevertheless, there are occasions when Abel surprises even Margaret, such as at the time when her parents invite her in-laws to their home. After dinner, Abel rises to make a toast and he asks Margaret to interpret:

Margaret saw and tried to catch her mother's eye. The Anglins were looking a little terrified . . . There was a minute of waiting and then he began to speak to them, his Sign slow, balanced and precise. Margaret watched in amazement, translating automatically but unable to convey the difference between his ordinary speech and this haunting and evocative flow of language. The Signs were formal and complete and they had a grace and subtlety that she had never seen . . . For whom was this being made, all this secret eloquence, if not for her alone? "My father wishes to say—he says—he has heard that on important holidays it is correct for a man to say over his drink what he wishes for the people who are close to him—who are in his thoughts . . ." She found that her face was contorted with the effort of trying to bring to them the cadence of his words and their quality of yearning. "When Hearing have a child and she grows to be a woman and is married, father—mother—the parents cry at the wedding because she is leaving them and they know they will be lonely

for her. When Deaf have such a child, a Hearing child, she grows up in the Hearing world, and when she is married, father and mother do not cry. When the Hearing child leaves the house of the Deaf, their mouths are also taken away from them and their ears are taken away and the child also, whom they love. For this, tears are not enough. So they sit in the darkness . . ."

With the war, there came the winds of changing fortune. The virtues of perseverance, hard-working habits and manual dexterity bring some measure of prosperity and renown to Abel and Janice. They finally pay off the debt for the car; they buy a home in the suburbs; they are promoted to positions of responsibility on the job. It is somewhat ironic that it takes a war and the decimation of the "able-bodied labor ranks" to recognize the capabilities of the deaf, but such are the facts of life.

It is equally ironic that it is not Margaret but her own son, Marshall, who best learns to understand the sufferings of her parents and man's inhumanity to man. When Marshall grows to manhood, he leaves college and journeys through the deep South where he joins the Civil Rights Movement to bring equal opportunities to the Negro. In a letter to his parents, Marshall states his rationale for leaving home and college:

" . . . In setting up the Freedom Schools and giving assistance and advice to the small local Black Churches, we are hoping to bring these forgotten people into modern society. These beautiful people have been silent for too long. Now they are crying out, and America must be taught to heed them . . . So I know you will be glad for me, and will have greater sympathy for this work than the average middle class person. Sharing your problems and humiliations has made me sensitive to suffering . . ."

The final irony, however, is in the fact that the young idealist journeyed to the deep South to champion a cause when he might have found a greater need for his services in the home of his grandparents—who represent the loneliest of all disadvantaged peoples. This is Abel's reaction after Margaret interprets his grandson's letter:

"So the poor need!" Abel said, "Then—the hand trembled and then cut like a curse—"I am the poor! I need! Do you tell him to look far away, to see with his good eyes all the way to—to—" and he broke the Indian name of the town to pieces in his hands—"when Poor is here! We are the Poor! . . . Not poor in money, I know it, I know it, not in money—poor in—in World-thing, to do, to say, to know! In the World!"

This is the theme of *In This Sign*, and although the title is elliptical, its meaning becomes clear: "In this sign thou shalt conquer." Or, to put it differently—to communicate freely is to be wholly understood. And, one might add, to feel that somebody cares.

It might well apply to Everyman, especially in an age like ours, dominated by the pressures of modern technology and overpopulation. Accordingly, it should not be surprising to find an increasing appearance of deaf characters in modern fiction and drama. For the paradox of our time is that, in the midst of our greatest achievement in methods of communication and mass media, there is a striking similarity in the problems of the deaf and the dilemma of modern man.